

## Easter Five

Acts 11:1-18 Ps.148 Rev.21:1-6 Jn.13:31-35

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

Redeemer Lutheran Church April 24, 2016

A couple of weeks ago I gave a “lecture” to the Senior College at UMA per request of my colleague and friend Rabbi Darah Lerner, who had been asked to organize a six-week course on the topic of justice and righteousness presented from a number of different perspectives. So over the course of those six weeks Darah had an assortment of speakers addressing that subject, including folks from social service agencies, from Husson’s ethics department, from her own Jewish tradition, and me... Darah’s request to me being that I speak to and from the “**Christian** understanding of justice and righteousness.”

Well... As I told the fifteen or so members of the class that day, Darah’s request was really rather impossible, since no **one** Christian can speak to the understanding of **all** Christians on any subject... much less the important and challenging topic of justice and righteousness. “All I can do,” as I told the students that day, “is speak to my own understanding of those words as I come to encounter them in the tradition that most deeply shapes me, that tradition being the Christian denomination known as ‘Lutheran.’”

Now if we had been in Minnesota or Iowa or North Dakota, I could have at that point just launched right into **my** understanding of the “**Lutheran** understanding” of the “**Christian** understanding” of justice and righteousness. But because the word “Lutheran” is so foreign in these parts (people in Maine sometimes asking if the Lutheran “religion” is somehow connected to Lithuania, or if it’s named after Martin Luther King Jr.)...

...Because the word “Lutheran” is so foreign in these parts, I had to start my talk that day with a mini-lesson on Lutheran history and theology, just so people wouldn’t think I was from some strange sect or cult or off-shoot of Christianity that pledges its allegiance to the country of Lithuania or traces its roots back to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1950’s and 60’s...

(This frequent confusion over the word “Lutheran” always reminding me of a story Bishop Bob Isaacson used to tell about the day he was flying from Boston to NYC, and in conversation with the woman sitting next to him, told her that he was the Bishop of the New England Synod of the Lutheran Church in America. To which she responded after a moment of perplexed silence, “Is that a *proper* religion?” To which Bishop Isaacson responded rather tongue-in-cheek, “Oh I hope not.”)

So, all of this is just to say that I had quite a task ahead of me that day at the Senior College on any number of levels... requiring me to consider how to speak of justice and righteousness from the *Christian* perspective, when I could really only speak from *my* perspective (shaped in the Lutheran tradition), *and that* to a group of people who had little or no understanding of “Lutheran,” and who no doubt had a variety of opinions about Christianity itself, ranging from love to loathing...

Actually, I found it to be a very worthwhile assignment because it forced me to try to articulate as succinctly and as compellingly as I could the heart of the Christian proclamation, as seen through the lens of the Lutheran tradition for folks who may have never heard it before... And so, I tried to do just that, using three pieces of show and tell, including a tuning fork, a potato, and a heart made up of many pieces of broken pottery...

So I tell you all of this this morning, not because this is a sermon about justice and righteousness. Or because I’m going to give you the lecture I gave to the Senior College. But because I realized that the same three pieces of show and tell that I used that day could be used to reflect on the lessons appointed for this morning, which in combination with one another, couldn’t be a more perfect distillation of the heart of the Christian faith or a more perfect lens through which to see the “Lutheran” way of understanding this faith...

And all of this this on the very Sunday when we are gathering with folks new to Redeemer after the 10:30 service to talk about what the Lutheran

perspective of the Christian faith is all about, as well as the ways in which the Redeemer community seeks to live out of that perspective or tradition...

(Sometimes things simply come together in a most beautiful and unexpected way...)

So, **as for the tuning fork**, the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith would say that it is a way of life lived in response to a certain sound... (*strike the tuning fork*)... Just as musicians listen for a certain sound to which they tune their instruments before playing the music... Which is perhaps why Martin Luther, when asked to draw a picture depicting the essence of the Christian life, drew a picture of an ear...

The truth of which I came more fully to appreciate quite recently when reading a novel by Anthony Doerr entitled “All the Light We Cannot See” ... A novel that begins with a young German soldier during WWII who is an expert in radio construction, transmission and reception... And who, late one night, while manning his post somewhere in Germany, catches the radio waves sent by an old man broadcasting from a turret of a castle situated in the mountains of France...

Radio waves that bring to the young German soldier the music of Bach and Mozart and the rich cadences of the old man reading aloud from books that speak about the magnitude and complex beauty of the cosmos; books that tell stories of wonder and love, mystery and hope where you would least expect it...

Such stories and music carried in radio waves across a geographic expanse that is otherwise filled only with Nazi propaganda, with state-sponsored speech seeking to foster fear and hatred, all of it couched in language extolling the “virtues” of keeping things organized and safe and white and “pure”...

The young German soldier tuning his radio each night to hear the forbidden sounds of something “other” ... something that worked against the false, shallow sound-bites of the Third Reich... something that broke through the seductive, lulling, limited language of the “homeland.” Something that raised the young soldier’s head, opened his mind, expanded his imagination, broke his heart, and unbound him from the limitations and diminishments that sought to shape his life...

It is just such a sound that we hear in the proclamation of the message we call the “Gospel Word.” The sound of fierce and tender grace that seeks to counter all that would bind us to limits prescribed by political agendas, social hierarchies, diminished imaginations, fear-driven policies, demeaning behaviors, failed efforts, broken relationships, guilt-ridden pasts, shame, boredom, pain, loss, death... the sound of fierce and tender grace that comes even in the darkest night, even in the midnight air choked and chocked full of language that lulls and limits and lies...

The same sound of grace Peter heard on the roof that day in Joppa when the voice from heaven told him to eat of the food Levitical Law had deemed profane; the same sound of grace Peter heard when the Spirit of God told him not to distinguish between himself and those whom religious tradition had decreed outside the limits of God’s presence; namely the Gentiles...

The same sound of grace our Psalmist for this morning heard coming **not only** from the angels and the celestial choirs, from the stars and the moon and the mountains and hills, **but also** from the feral animals and the sea monsters; from the fire and hail, the snow and frost...

The same sound of grace, as the pastor of my childhood told us, that we hear when we pick up the telephone, and someone with whom we’ve had a horrible and unrepairable altercation, says on the other end of the telephone, “Elaine? Can we talk?” (Just when you decided it was in your best interest to hate that person forever.) Grace both fierce and tender for sure when it comes up against a heart that is determined to stay closed...

The same sound of grace we hear in those words spoken without the condition of “right” belief, or “right” behavior, or “right” religious background, “This is my body, broken for you... This is my blood, poured out for you... I have called you by name, you are mine.”

This is the sound to which we as Lutheran Christians tune our lives, listening in the midst of so many limiting and lulling lies for the sound of grace that will not be bound by such limitations, but crosses every boundary of geography, genealogy, ideology, fear-ology, shame-ology, pain-ology to raise our heads, and

open our minds, and expand our imaginations, and break our hearts, and unbind us from the diminishments that seek to shape our lives...

The sound carried in places and spaces and faces we might never expect; as St. Francis put it in a little poem called “Sacraments” when he wrote,

*I once spoke to my friend, an old squirrel,*

*about the Sacraments –*

*he got so excited*

*and ran into his hollow in his tree and came*

*back holding some acorns, an owl feather,*

*and a ribbon he had found.*

*And I just smiled and said, “Yes, dear,*

*you understand:*

*everything imparts*

*His grace.*

That “everything” bringing me to **the potato**... What could be considered more part of “everything” than the humble potato? What could be more down-to-earth or immersed in the dust and dirt of the ground upon which we walk?

I think this is what I love most about the Lutheran perspective on the Christian faith... this notion that it is most fully lived out in the ordinary down-to-earth places and situations in which we find ourselves... This insight leading to one of Martin Luther’s most impassioned indictments of the church of his day, which tended to hold up as more “God-pleasing” and “holy” those vocations that were “church-centric” and those endeavors that followed church expectations around

fasting and making penance and denying one's self the joys of full human existence and experience...

It was in reaction against such admonishments to "holy living" that Martin Luther insisted upon the "sacred act" of changing a baby's diaper, or the "sacred act" of sawing a board, or the "sacred act" of planting a garden, or the "sacred act" of making beer; all of these down-to-earth vocations and activities being "sacred" if done with care and reverence and love...

An insight that finds its roots not in Martin Luther's own personal philosophy on life, but in Jesus' own witness to the heart of God, beautifully reflected in our Gospel lesson for this morning, this text being part of Jesus' Farewell Address in John's Gospel...

The text in which the fullness of God's glory is seen in the suffering love of Jesus as he is lifted up on the cross, and the deepest expression of the Christian faith is found in servant love extended one person to another... That love, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel made visceral and real and incarnate in the washing and drying of feet... Feet being the part of our bodies that share the same dirt and dust as potatoes...

As one theologian has said, "We often miss seeing God because we don't look low enough." Perhaps a Lutheran variation on this theme would put it this way... "We often miss bearing witness to God because we don't **live or love** low enough."

No wonder one 6<sup>th</sup> century mystic put it this way....

*It helps*

*putting my hands on a pot, on a broom,*

*in a wash*

*pail.*

*I*

*tried painting,*

*but it was easier to fly slicing  
potatoes.*

One of my favorite “sacred potato” stories being told by Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Webber who wrote about her congregation’s response to the death of a young man in their community who died of a drug overdose... A young man who had originally come from a loving and supportive family in Iowa, but who had for some reason lost his way somewhere between Iowa and Church of All Saints and Sinners in Denver, succumbing to the devastating effects of addiction, including addictions to drugs and alcohol and pornography.

And so after his death, the congregation at All Saints and Sinners decided the best way they could honor the memory of this young man, whom they loved, was to rid his apartment of all of his pornographic materials, so that when his sweet parents arrived from Iowa to collect his things, they would not have to see that part of their son’s afflictions... And so that is what the congregation did...

Martin Luther would call that “sacred work” .... “down in the trenches, roll up your sleeves, foot-washing, potato-digging, wash pail scrubbing, holy, devastating, beautiful, servant love, sacred work” ....

In keeping perhaps, with a denomination that is not quite “proper,” if by “proper” we mean removed from the basest, most God-forsaken, derelict of times or places or spaces.... “Not quite proper” if by “proper” we mean “Hallmark pretty” and “Boy Scout Clean” and “Walt Disney Happy.”

Which is why the third show-and-tell item I have for speaking of the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith is a **heart made up of many pieces of broken pottery...**

Because for Lutherans, it is among the broken pieces of this suffering world and in the broken pieces of our lives that we come to know most profoundly the power and presence of the One whose essence we call “God.”

The writer of the book of Revelation had it right; set in the context of the violence and oppression of the Roman Empire, John of Patmos named the overarching reality of the times for his struggling Christian community... They lived in a sea of tears, with fear and loss and death as their most constant companions. And in the midst of their suffering John offered hope... not in the form of a powerful avenger to wage war on the brutal grip of Rome... But in the form of a lamb, whose “power” was his presence... his incarnate, accompanying, suffering, being-with presence... not as one who would swoop in and make everything “right,” but as one who would be “with” his people in all the times and places where nothing was “right” at all...

As one of my professors at the Lutheran seminary in Philadelphia used to say, “Never say anything about God that you can’t say while standing next to a pit filled with burning babies, because if what you want to say about God can’t be said there, then it isn’t true...”

What could anyone possibly say about God in such a place as that? What could anyone possible say about God when standing at the bedside of a loved one racked with pain? Or when confronting the reality of one’s own “unholy” past? Or when considering the present suffering of so many people in our world? What could anyone possibly say about God in such times and places?

Perhaps mostly nothing at all... As a friend of mine once said, “If I’m ever in the midst of great suffering, don’t come and tell me about Jesus. Just come and be Jesus for me.” ....

As I am sometimes apt to say about us Lutherans, “we are the denomination closest to atheism... Because we live without the false gods of “happily ever after” in exchange for the God of suffering love... And in the midst of moments that are utterly God-forsaken, without a single hope in sight, we hold onto the odd and scandalous image of the lamb who was slain; the God-forsaken image of Jesus lifted high on the cross...

The only image with the power to wipe tears from eyes and to turn mourning into joy... The power of a love willing to come down into the midst of it



all with arms and heart open... the accompanying kind... the Emmanuel, God with us kind... the “come hell or high water I’m not leaving you” kind... The kind of love that will not “leave us be” until the broken pieces of our lives are gathered into a wholeness that looks like this... *(Show the heart made up of broken pieces of pottery.)*

And the thing is... the thing I love most of all about all things “Lutheran” is that in order for this love to be ours, we don’t even have to believe it’s true... Because it’s ours whether we have the ability to believe it or not... It’s all around us whether we have the ability to see it or not... like those radio waves carrying the sound of Mozart and Bach and stories of wonder and beauty in the dark night air otherwise filled with lulling, limiting, and deadly lies...

It’s all around us... God’s presence, whose essence is love... longing for us to hear, to see, to know... longing for us, while we’re cleaning potatoes, or changing a baby’s diaper, or sitting alongside a loved one’s hospital bed, or ridding a friend’s apartment of pornographic materials before his sweet parents from Iowa arrive to gather up his things...

Longing for us to catch in the overwhelming darkness of every moment the sound of... love...